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Can DVD Catch Up to Its Promise?

By Steve Dittles September/October 1999

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Capturing a hot market and exploiting technological promise are two different things. Take the DVD. The digital video (oh, all right, versatile) disc player is one of the fastest-selling consumer electronics introductions ever, with more than 2.5 million units shipped in the United States since March 1997. But for all their commercial fizz, DVDs have barely touched the interactive possibilities of the medium for presenting movies. Wide-screen format, all-male takes, cast filmographies, even directors' narrations are all well and good-but these bonus features have been available on 12-inch laser discs since the antediluvian '80s.

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Now, the DVD may be beginning to live up to its potential-though in conjunction with the PC rather than the TV. A good example was the first live DVD online event, earlier this year, for director John Frankenheimer's film, "Ronin." Frankenheimer chatted from the movie's Web site, relating to outtakes and other hidden material triggered to play off each visitor's DVD-but only for those on a Windows PC equipped with a DVD-ROM player. (The event is archived at www.mgm.com/dvd/ronin for replay with the disc).


"There's so much more content possible for DVD movies with a PC and the Internet," explains Tom Collart, CEO of InterActual Technologies in Mountain View, Calif. Collart's company publishes the "PCFriendly" software that manages the content on the "Ronin" DVD. He cites such possibilities as always-up-to-date filmographies and early versions of scripts, downloaded from a movie's Web site. PCFriendly already allows movie buffs with a PC to view the shooting script for "Rush Hour" (and other New Line releases) and link to the corresponding scene on the disc.

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As DVDs become standard on desktop and laptop machines, PCs with higher resolution displays will far outnumber DVD players attached to televisions. Powerful PCs and Macintoshes and soon-to-appear DVD-playing set-top boxes for cable-connected TVs should make greater interactivity commonplace. Now that the potential of the medium has begun to be tapped, the question remains: Which major film director will be first to use the DVD's powers to the maximum? Who will create the first truly interactive movie, with, say, multiple plot lines and endings? "The obstacle isn't technical," says Collart, who is in the midst of discussions with almost all the Hollywood studios for use of his software. "No successful feature film director is going to risk a career by being first with interactive storytelling on DVD."




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